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SUBJECT: COLOMBIANS ALLEGEDLY CAPTURE FARC "FORMIN" IN
CARACAS

REF: 2004 CARACAS 02153

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

¶1. (C) The alleged abduction from Caracas to Colombia of FARC "foreign minister" Rodrigo Granda during December 13-14 has become the most publicized news story of the new year after initially garnering little attention from the Venezuelan press. On December 15, the Colombian Defense Ministry claimed Granda had been arrested in Cucuta, Colombia. On January 3, the FARC protested the action in an official communique. Venezuela's National Assembly named a committee to investigate the action, while Interior and Justice Minister Jesse Chacon and other government officials proceeded cautiously and inconsistently, facing mounting evidence that Granda was living in Venezuela with the connivance of the GOV. After opponents of President Hugo Chavez publicized proof of Granda's Venezuelan naturalization, Chavez said it should be revoked because the FARC leader had obtained it under false pretenses. The Chavez administration's dilemma is how to contend with criticism for harboring terrorists or for allowing Colombian officials to operate in Venezuela with impunity. End summary.

¶2. (C) The alleged abduction of senior FARC official Rodrigo Granda--known as the guerrillas' "foreign minister"--from Venezuela to Colombia has become Venezuela's lead news story of the new year. On December 15, the GOC announced Granda's arrest in the Colombian border town of Cucuta on December 14. The FARC, protesting through an official communique on January 3, and Granda, via his lawyer, attested to press rumors alleging he was "kidnapped" in downtown Caracas. According to Granda's version, Colombian officials posing as Venezuelan intelligence (Disip) officers shoved him into the trunk of a car on the afternoon of December 13 and drove him 16 hours to Cucuta, Colombia. Other media outlets speculated about GOV complicity in the abduction, generating criticism of the GOV from the left. Colombian Defense Minister Jorge Uribe disavowed the FARC story, saying Granda was captured in Cucuta on the 14th. While sticking to the story that no violation of Venezuelan sovereignty occurred, he averred on January 12 that the GOC had paid for information leading to Granda's arrest. A radical pro-Chavez advisor for citizen security issues in the Caracas metropolitan mayor's office told poloff in late December that the GOV knew the operation had taken place in Caracas. Separately, on 6 January an anti-Chavez official in the Venezuelan Ministry of Interior and Justice (MIJ) confirmed to poloff the GOV had known about the Caracas capture.

GOV Publicly Cautious

¶3. (U) Faced with Colombian press reports asserting the capture had occurred in Venezuela, Interior and Justice Minister Jesse Chacon on December 29 ordered the investigation of a kidnapping that took place on December 13 near a Caracas metro station. By early January, a media storm had erupted over the issue. On January 5, Chacon said that it was difficult to determine the true identity of the victim, but he accepted that corrupt Venezuelan officials in collusion with Colombians may have captured Granda at the site. The National Assembly followed by announcing its own investigation on January 6. Foreign Minister Ali Rodriguez urged patience while authorities completed their investigation.

Granda's Business in Venezuela

¶4. (C) According to a pro-Government tabloid, National Assembly deputy Marelys Perez said on 6 January that Granda had been living in Venezuela for years. Perez immediately denied making the statement but admitted that Granda had been

in Venezuela to attend a "Bolivarian Congress of the People" on 7-8 December. The FARC communique stated Granda had participated at the invitation of the Venezuelan Government, which Perez also denied. Granda's lawyer, meanwhile, said Granda had obtained Venezuelan citizenship and offered his Venezuelan cedula number as proof. Chacon countered that many people obtain cedulas illegally at the border. Granda was not a citizen, the Minister said, adding that the GOV had no record of him entering the country.

GOV Busted

15. (U) On January 7, former president of the Venezuelan Congress Cristobal Fernandez Dalo held a press conference in which he showed a copy of the July 9, 2004 official GOV gazette listing Granda as a naturalized citizen. Fernandez cited the gazette as proof that the GOV had lied about Granda's citizenship and--if Granda did not complete five years of Venezuelan residence before applying--had naturalized him illegally. Granda's lawyer, in a follow-on interview, attested that Granda had waited in line for 11 hours to receive naturalization. Granda's citizenship has played into the hands of government critics, who have asserted that the GOV's pre-referendum citizenship drive was fraudulent (REFTEL). Opposition members also have circulated via email a 2002 article from Caracas daily El Universal alleging that Granda had served on a secret Disip committee charged with providing Colombians illegal access to Venezuela; the newspaper has since republished the story. To further embarrass the GOV, the press has reprinted Colombian President Alvaro Uribe's 2002 avowal that Colombian authorities would capture guerrillas in Venezuela if Chavez did not hand them over as promised.

GOV Scrambles to React

16. (U) On the same day as Fernandez's conference, Chacon affirmed that Granda had been kidnapped in Caracas. Chavez weighed in on January 9 during his "Alo Presidente" broadcast that Colombian police had lied about having captured Granda in Colombia, although he cautioned at a press conference the following day that the GOV had not yet established Colombian police involvement in the "kidnapping." He added that he would bring up the issue with Colombian President Uribe. Having committed himself to protesting Granda's abduction, Chavez began to try to explain his presence in the country. Showing an alleged copy of Granda's passport, Chavez accused Granda of using false documents to obtain naturalization, which he said should be revoked. He deflected charges of having protected a terrorist by demanding that countries request extradition of such criminals rather than violating international law by extraterritorial kidnappings. On January 12, ex-intelligence chief and current National Land Institute (INTI) director Eliezer Otaiza suggested the CIA could have been involved in the operation.

Comment

17. (C) The FARC's going public on the Granda case has forced the GOV into a situation in which it has had difficulty saving face. Disavowing Granda would be tantamount to admitting it has allowed a violation of Venezuelan sovereignty. Protesting the arrest leaves the GOV vulnerable to charges of protecting a terrorist and padding electoral rolls with foreigners. For the time being, Chavez has hedged his bets by criticizing Colombian cops while stopping short of faulting the Colombian government directly, a position made more tenable by Colombia's recent admission of having paid for information (ostensibly from corrupt Venezuelan officials) on Granda. Chavez may also take greater advantage of his tried-and-true trick of blaming the United States to distract the public from the real nature of the problem. End comment.
Brownfield